

Officials connected to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico said during questioning by Iowa Congressman Bruce Braley today that the rig had no way of alerting officials on shore whether emergency alarms had sounded before it exploded last month.

Braley, a Waterloo Democrat, noted during questioning of the officials during a subcommittee hearing about the catastrophe that data that showed pressure in the platform's pipe multiplied rapidly in the two minutes before the explosion on April 20.

That data was transmitted from the rig to shore, but officials said the emergency alarms were not similarly monitored from a remote location.

"So you have no mirrored back-up data device so that that information is recorded at some other location than on the rig itself?" Braley asked Steve Newman, the president and CEO of Transocean, the owner of the drilling platform.

"Do you think that's a failure in the fail-safe system that is currently used within the industry to help understand the events of a catastrophe like this and learn from it?" Braley said.

Newman said any record of emergency alarms sounding would have been destroyed when the drilling platform exploded and burned.

"I'm aware of that technology existing and in fact the reason for the records you're showing us now is because that technology was employed on this particular operation," Newman said. However, Newman added that it didn't apply to logs of the alarms.

Braley, in his second term, is a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee's subcommittee on oversight and investigations.

Braley later asked Newman why Transocean asked why employees rescued from the rig were asked to sign forms saying they were not witnesses to and had no first-hand information about the incident. Eleven crew members are missing and presumed dead. The others were rescued and taken ashore for medical treatment.

"Can you tell us why he was asked to sign a statement that he had no firsthand or personal knowledge regarding the incident after experiencing that?" Braley asked after reading the account of an employee who witnessed employees being injured, burned and piling into life boats.

They were also provided with a form, but not ordered to sign it, Newman said.

"One of our concerns in the aftermath of this event, Congressman, is to conduct as thorough a fact-finding exercise as we can," Newman said. "And part of the facilitation of that fact-finding exercise is to identify individuals who might have helpful knowledge."